

## **The Children Are Our Future** *By Whitney Shinkle*

At 7:45 am on a Saturday morning, the student café at San Francisco State University is vibrating with energy. Students from across San Francisco, and as far away as Ukiah and Santa Cruz, are gathered around cafeteria tables with their teammates, nervously awaiting the start of the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual World Affairs Challenge. Students in jeans and t-shirts jockey for orange juice and bagels with students in suits and ties, sports jerseys, even a muumuu or two. Some teams run final rehearsals or debate last minute script changes for their upcoming presentations, while navigating a sea of props that includes globes, microphones, posters, boom-boxes and laptops.

For weeks, if not months, these students have been studying current international events and researching the global energy situation either in class or in after-school extracurricular groups in order to participate in the World Affairs Challenge. In this annual event middle school and high school aged students compete individually and in teams to demonstrate their understanding of, and ability to develop creative solutions to, global problems. This past March, about 350 students and 85 volunteer judges descended on the San Francisco State University campus to wrestle with the global energy crisis.

The President of the University is the keynote speaker for the short opening ceremony, and as he welcomes these future collegians to his campus – assuring those not from the City that “it’s hardly ever foggy like this” – the students are nearly wriggling with anticipation.

The children are our future. It is a phrase that adults in the United States seem to utter with nearly equal measures of hope and trepidation. There is hope that each generation will rise above the prejudices and limitations that constrained their parents. But the great majority of stories about American youth depict a generation of individuals who are sedentary and obese, violent or depressed, undereducated, over-stimulated, and unfocused. The popular theme is that the ascending generation is neither prepared for, nor interested in, steering our country through perhaps the most complex, globally interwoven era it has ever known. One day with the student participants of the World Affairs Challenge will convince you that these dire warnings are overstated.

As a volunteer judge I observed and spoke with a number of students. Invariably the students were bright, creative, thoughtful, curious, and open-minded. Some students clearly embraced a leadership role, while others were more comfortable operating behind the scenes, but nearly all evinced awareness that beyond increasing their knowledge about global energy, they were building essential skill sets - leadership and problem solving, communication and presentation, and research and analysis - as well as a new sense of self, and world, awareness.

Moreover, students clearly applied their lessons to their everyday situations outside the classroom. Jenna Bernard, a 15 year old from Mercy High School, had some constructive criticism for the University. “Did you notice, when we had lunch there was no composting,” she pointed out. “They should have that. If all the schools started a compost thing, 70 percent of all landfill garbage could be reused. We found this statistic while we were researching.”

While students like Bernard managed to maintain their nonchalance while admitting that it was “cool to have facts to back up what you’re saying,” Aljona Andrejeff, a teacher at Washington High School in her second year coaching World Affairs Challenge teams, was quick to confirm that factual

knowledge wasn't all that students gained from the experience. She gushed over the improvements in public speaking skills, critical thinking, confidence and camaraderie exhibited by her students who participated in the Challenge. One of her teams facilitated their research by delegating a subject to each team member who was responsible for becoming the expert on that topic. "They team taught team members. I've never seen kids do that on their own," she asserted.

Students themselves clearly realized a difference in their own attitudes towards international understanding. Elisha Chan, a 15 year old sophomore, admitted that she originally decided to participate in the Challenge because a teacher said it would look good on her college application. But when asked about her experience, she raved about cooperating with students from other schools on the collaborative question. "There were a lot of ideas I would never have thought of," she said. "There is no perfect way to solve the problem, but we picked the [solution] that worked best for now... We have to think of the world as a whole, not just [one] country." Now, she added, she "reads the newspaper almost every day. Before I wasn't as interested in it."

Other students commented that the experience taught them to be more critical of their sources of information. Alex Manter, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader from River Middle School, said that based on the little information he'd seen, he expected to find that renewable energy sources were an obvious answer to the global energy problem. Instead he found that "renewable energy gets such good press, but then you learn that, oh, solar energy doesn't produce enough energy [for everyone] and there's all these other factors." In the end, his team realized that there was no clear cut solution and that their response would have to represent a more nuanced approach to providing sustainable global energy.

At the end of the day, the three hundred plus students gather back in the school auditorium for the award ceremony. Teams are drained from the long day of activities, ties hang loosely from unbuttoned collars and high heels have been traded for multicolored sneakers. Anticipation still burbles through the room as predictions are floated about winners and prizes. Despite the hundreds of different perspectives the students brought to the Challenge, and their ongoing disagreements about the best "solution" to global energy, they all shared the sentiment young people need to develop a greater understanding of international issues. The competitive edge lingers, but some of the students have taken advantage of the brief lull as the results are calculated to mingle with their neighbors, and as the awards ceremony begins, they all applaud each others efforts, and applaud earnestly.

Perhaps 11 year old Corey Yuan put it best when he said "People need to understand all these subjects. I want to be a doctor. If my country's economy is poor, the doctors might not receive as many vaccinations or something. [Young] people should know more about world affairs because it can affect them when they grow up."

After the culmination of the awards ceremony, one Washington High School team was already heading out to "debrief" and give each other constructive criticism to build on for next year's Challenge. If these are the young people of our future. I'm nothing but optimistic.

***Whitney Shinkle is a grant writer at the San Francisco Food Bank and was a volunteer Judge at the 2005 World Affairs Challenge.***